

The language of nationalism: what to make of the leaked immigration plans



*What should we make of the leaked document on EU immigration post-Brexit? Taking a much harder line than the official negotiating stance, it set out a vision in which EU migrants lose their rights as individuals and are admitted only if they serve the collective needs of the UK. This is a dangerously nationalistic stance, says **Georgiana Turculet (Central European University)**. It rightly caused alarm. But we should await the Immigration Bill to find out the government's true intentions.*

The legal status of EU citizens in (or planning to come to) the UK, as well as their right to family reunification, are likely to change drastically. Even if the UK does not leave the Single Market, the demand for changes to immigration law will have pernicious effects.

Leaked extracts from [a document](#) setting out the UK government's plans to deal with EU immigration post-Brexit suggest a tougher approach than the one the government proposed in June. Rightly, the leaked report has caused considerable alarm. It contains nationalistic ideas, is based on false facts, and overall the effects of its proposals would lead to a much harsher climate for EU citizens than the government's official position suggests.



A Hobbesian state? Detail from the title page of the first edition of *Leviathan*, as reproduced on the Penguin edition. Photo: [Keir Hardie](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

The guiding ideology of the report (which is factually false) suggests that the UK immigration system will serve the UK's interests ahead of those of migrants. This idea is built on the false assumption – which goes against all academic evidence – that the current UK migration system benefits EU citizens (or migrants), and disadvantages UK citizens. Most evidence points to the contrary. Migrants contribute financially much more than they claim in benefits, and the migration system is already designed to ensure that receiving countries – not only the UK, but most countries in the Western world – gain economically.

This is a nationalistic trope, because it sets up a myopic dichotomy between “our” interests and “theirs”. A country’s interests can no longer be framed in this simplistic way. For instance, when it comes to national security, the UK’s interests of the UK can only be guaranteed in tight collaboration with NATO allies, including the EU. Economically, many of the UK’s financial transactions take place in Europe: not only do about half of its exports go to Europe, but market regulations can only be framed with regard to global interests. UK officials know that this backward-looking ideology – rather Westphalian and Hobbesian, in fact – will endanger the UK if it does not keep its economic allies close.

One example of the nationalistic language in the report is particularly worrying:

“When determining whether to refuse entry to an EU citizen at the border, or whether to deport them ... we will want to apply the same criteria as we do now for non-EU nationals as soon as is practicable after we leave”.

Notice that “we” versus “them” appears both in the language and in the substance. The report intends to treat EU citizens, who pre-Brexit were often referred to as fellow citizens, as migrants from third countries. Migrants, unlike EU citizens, are generally harshly scrutinised, require all sorts of documents to gain entry to the UK, and are expected to put up with long queues in embassies and many months of uncertainty, even for a short tourist visit. This nationalistic approach is hard to square with a collaborative, open and shared spirit, which recognises our common interest in knowledge, growth and science. “Those registering with us” – as if “us” were a homogenous body, acting against the world – will be treated like non-EU migrants, will have to provide proof of employment, etc., and in order to protect against identity fraud, “we may wish to take the fingerprints of those new arrivals who are registering” (p. 6). (authors’ emphasis).

The language of the leaked proposal suggests that EU citizens will be degraded from their previous status of “citizens” to “migrants”, a term that carries within itself the assumption of a potential security threat. Furthermore, EU citizens’ interests are to be curtailed in favour of the interests of UK citizens. This means that contact, collaboration and fraternising with UK citizens will no longer be a right, or a relatively easy thing to do, but will instead be a privilege that they will have to request from the state. The state, and not private citizens, establish the collective interest and supersede private interest.

Is this necessary? No. Could another approach have been taken? Yes, it could – and it should.

According to the leaked report, the government is changing the migration system from a system of rights to a system of interests:

“the Government will take a view on the economic and social needs to the country as regards EU migration rather than leaving this decision entirely to those wishing to come here, and employers” (p.7).

The suggestion is that the national collective interest will come before those of migrants, and that migrants’ interests and needs will be curtailed and adjusted to the national need. But both are false proposals based on mistaken assumptions.

First, nothing was stopping the UK from reforming its social and economic sectors to accommodate the effects of freedom of movement. For example, it could have taxed the the industries that benefitted from it more heavily in order to pay for social welfare and redistribution towards areas burdened by influxes of migrants. It could have ensured that the public services in these areas were properly resourced. Instead, it takes the narrow-minded view that the right of private individuals to associate freely must be curtailed.

Second, the rights curtailed will not be those of migrants alone. The right of citizens to associate with immigrants, and vice versa, is at stake. The UK could have decided to distribute resources more fairly so as not to disadvantage the British-born, without resorting to a nationalistic ‘us-versus-them’ discourse.

Importantly, however, it is not clear whether this is the position of the UK government. It should not be viewed as official, unless evidence proves otherwise or the Home Office admits to having discussed any version of it. Speculation about who leaked it and why is a dangerous distraction. The government's official position is still set out in the June report (see our [previous post](#)). The forthcoming Immigration Bill will make the government's true intentions clearer.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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